

Black Swan: the elements of fairy tales

Keiko Kimura

Abstract: The movie Black Swan is directed by Darren Aronofsky. The title of this movie comes from the ballet performance, Swan Lake. The title refers to the third act of Swan Lake in which two swans, one black (Odile), and one white (Odette), feature. The black swan appears as a mysterious princess who betrays her Prince. In the story the audience is required to speculate as to whether the two swans are different, or they represent the divided selves of the same swan who was previously female.

In the movie there are a number of recurring themes, among which are: mirrors; doubles; the colors; the mother-daughter relationship; the referential motif of fairy tales; and fantasy and reality. These motifs are emphasized by their repetition. After being appointed as the principal dancer of a new production of Swan Lake by an artistic director of a ballet company in New York City, the heroine, Nina Sayers, meets a series of doubles many times, in a variety of real life situations and as reflected images in mirrors. As the title suggests, colors are also important motifs in the movie, especially, black, white, and red. Red symbolizes the color of blood. The mother-daughter relationship is also explored, with this relationship having echoes of Snow White. Nina's mother has a conflicting and simultaneous love for and jealousy of her daughter. She has always supported and helped her daughter, but after Nina is chosen as the principal dancer of the company, her mother comes to envy her.

Keywords: Ballet Movie, Double, Fairy Tales, Colors

A backstage drama of *Swan Lake*

The title of this movie, *Black Swan*, comes from the ballet work, *Swan Lake*. *Swan Lake* was first produced in 1877 and is based on a Russian folk tale. The music was composed by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and the original choreography was by Julius Reisinger, and later revised by Marius Petipa and others. *Swan Lake* is the dual story

of a White Swan (Odette) and a Black Swan (Odile). Usually one dancer performs both roles. That is, the heroine has to dance/act a schizophrenic double role. The title refers to the third act of *Swan Lake* in which the Black Swan appears as a mysterious princess who seduces and betrays the Prince. The White Swan and the Black Swan: are they different people? Or do they represent the divided selves of a swan who has previously been a woman? There are many themes in this movie, among which are: mirrors; doubles; the colors – especially black, white, and red; the mother-daughter relationship; the referential motifs of fairy tales; and fantasy and reality. These motifs are emphasized by their repetition in the movie.

A male-dominated pyramid system world

Even though the main characters in most ballet works are performed by female dancers, in reality they are operating within the traditions of a male-dominated world. Within the global ballet scene, most artistic directors and choreographers are male, and favored female dancers are the objects of envy among other female dancers. For dancers, male and female, artistic directors and choreographers are all-powerful within their companies. In this movie, the director, Thomas Leroy, decides everything. In instructing his female dancers, Leroy is happy to use sexual intimidation as a form of manipulation to goad his charges toward his own ideal.

Usually ballet companies consist of a pyramid system: principals, first soloists, soloists, first artists, artists, and *corp de ballet* dancers. Because of the nature of this system and the closed world of the ballet company, female dancers are driven to become competitive. In most of the classical works, female dancers play the role of heroine. However, controlled by male artistic directors and/or choreographers, female dancers have to fashion their interpretations to suit those of their directors in a relationship closely resembling that of puppet and puppeteer.

Moreover, in female dancers' minds, everybody is their rival, and trust and friendships among female dancers are rare. Usually ballet companies have several principal dancers, but in this movie, to emphasize the competitive nature of the female dancers' world, there is a solitary principal dancer. She is like the queen of a beauty pageant chosen by a panel of male judges.

New York City symbolizes the busy and competitive world of creative endeavor. In the early scenes of the movie we see the lead character Nina¹ Sayers walking into

¹ The name "Nina" reminds us of a world famous dancer, Nina Ananiashviri.

the real building of the NYCB (New York City Ballet Company) in the Lincoln Center in New York City. This suggests that the ballet company Nina belongs is one of similar prestige. The artistic head of this company is George Ballancine, one of the greatest artistic directors of his generation and upon whom the films counterpart appears to be based. Ballancine has had a number of partners, five in total, all of them dancers who have been the inspiration for his work.

Many elements are demanded of a principal dancer beyond those of technical ability and artistic interpretation. Sometimes an artistic director's favorite dancer or dancer who inspires a director for whatever reason is chosen as a principal dancer. In the story, the principal dancer of the Company, Beth Macintyre, is forced to resign because of her age and decline in ability and beauty. On becoming a principal dancer, the only option is retirement on losing that exalted position, one cannot become a first soloist or any other position within the company again. Most leave the world of live performance to become instructors.

The motifs of the mirror and the double (doppelgänger)

The mirror motif is related to the double and divided selves. In the Western world, they call one's other self the double/doppelgänger – the other self is projected onto another person. Many critics have focused on the idea of the double in literary works. The double assumes the malevolent or repressed characteristics of the self, is isolated from consciousness, and becomes a "shadow" which presages destruction and death. The concept of this shadow is developed by Carl Gustav Jung and its concept is similar to that of "projective identification" (Freud, Melanie Klein, and others). From the object relations psychoanalytic point of view, the concept of "projective identification" was introduced into analytic thinking by Melanie Klein. According to Klein, in the first stage of his/her life, the infant experiences his/her own aggression as it manifests itself, usually taking the form of "attacking" the breast of the mother in the "phantasy"² of the infant. One of the ways the infant tries to deal with his/her own destructiveness is by forcefully and "controllingly" intruding into the mother's body in the "phantasy." What are expelled are harmful split-off parts of the infant's self. This is a kind of externalization of his/her internal conflict. As a result, the mother is felt to represent the infant's "bad" self. It is applicable to adults as well. In "projective identification," one splits off "bad" parts of the self— one's

² Melanie Klein uses the word "phantasy" for unconscious fantasies to distinguish them from conscious fantasies and to clarify the definition of her theory.

mental state such as anger, hatred or other bad feeling or one's bad characteristics which are deeply denied in the self — and attributes them to others. The others are thereby identified with the parts of his/her self that are violently hated. “Projective identification” is, thus, used for the denial of psychic reality.

To show this double world in the film, there are mirrors everywhere in the scenes. At Nina's house, in the studios and the dressing rooms of the ballet company, and even on the glass in the NY subway. For dancers, at the rehearsal studios it is necessary to check their poses, configuration, and steps in the mirror.

After being appointed as the principal dancer of a new production of *Swan Lake*, Nina meets her double many times, not only in mirrors, but in a variety of real life situations. In the mirrors, Nina's images seem to have their own will, and move in spite of Nina's will – this suggests that Nina is not in control of her actions. The “selves” in the mirror are sometimes uncanny. They reveal the dark side of Nina which is repressed in the unconsciousness.

In the movie, through Nina's “projective identification,” Lily becomes the double of Nina. Lily is a new member of the company newly arrived from San Francisco and embodies the free-minded west-coast woman. On the other hand, Nina is a traditional conservative east-coast woman. Leroy evaluates Lily's capricious and sensual nature favorably against Nina's more staid personality. Nina has the White Swan image and Lily the Black Swan image. Lily has the opposite character of Nina and Nina feels pressured by Lily because of this. Leroy chooses Lily as Nina's standby, her alternate, and she comes to threaten Nina's position as principal dancer. If Lily is Nina's shadow double, their homoerotic scene conveys Nina's struggle to fuse with her other self – actually Lily denies her seduction of Nina, the suggestion being that Nina had imagined it. Nina wants to embody the Black Swan's sensuality and seductiveness in the manner that Lily does.

On the opening day of the performance of *Swan Lake*, before the third scene – the Black Swan scene – in her dressing room, Nina finds Lily and hears Lily saying she will dance the Black Swan for Nina who is not suitable for the role. Embarrassed, Nina presses Lily's body hard against the mirror in the dressing room and crushes Lily into the mirror which causes the mirror to break into many pieces, which literally reflect the many Ninas – and, as a result of which, she has produced many copies of her double. After that, Lily wraps her fingers around Nina's neck, and tries to strangle her before Nina sticks a piece of broken mirror into Lily's abdomen to stop her. The red blood flows from Lily's abdomen and her mouth, and she dies.

These many pieces of the broken mirror symbolize Nina's disintegrated and fragmentary self. It seems that Nina's desire to be united with her other self is in crisis. But after shouting, "It's my turn!" to Lily, Nina's eyes turn red and she "becomes" the Black Swan herself – not simply "playing the part". Nina pushes Lily's dead body into the bathroom and goes onstage to dance the Black Swan, which she does magnificently. This incorporation of mirrors is also connected with the story, *Snow White*, in which Mother-Daughter conflicts appears.

The colors - black, white, and red

As the title suggests, color is also an important motif in the movie, especially, black, white, and red. The symbolic significance of color changes based on time and culture but the image of white as goodness, purity, and innocence; and that of black as badness, evil and death are constant.

Nina is a white swan-like dancer as Leroy has pointed out. Her dance is elegant, beautiful, and fragile. Nina herself has the same character. In *Swan Lake*, the prince is attracted by White Swan's beauty and fragility, and wants to save her from the evil sorcerer (Rothbart) who has turned her into a swan with his magic.

For the audition for the next heroine of *Swan Lake* in the company, Nina is chosen as one of the applicants, but from the director she is told that she is not suitable for the Black Swan role. The heroine has to perform two contrasting roles: The White Swan and the Black Swan. As the director, Leroy tells Nina that she is technically suitable for the White Swan, but not for the Black Swan because of her lack of sensuality, and fame-fatale qualities. Following Leroy's advice, Nina struggles to understand and feel the role of the Black Swan from her heart. The White Swan and the Black Swan are just roles in the piece, so what is required is how to "act" two different characters, not "become" them. The problem for Nina is that she attempts to "become" both characters. This drives her to be the point of insanity and delusional hallucinations.

In the monochrome image of the work, the color red is very important, symbolizing blood, fire, and passion. One of the most impressive scenes is that when Nina, wearing red lip stick stolen from Beth, goes to talk with Leroy and states her wish to be the heroine of *Swan Lake*. At that time, kissed by him, Nina bites his curled lip which draws blood. Though shocked by her deed, Leroy decides to cast her to be the heroine. Her seductive red lips and her passion, evidenced in the deed of biting, has revealed Nina's inner passionate self which is usually hidden.

From the early scenes of the movie, we are shown that Nina is tormented by a running red sore on her back which is caused by her unconscious scratching during sleeping. On the opening day of the performance, in the third act, Nina's eyes turn red which shows the Black Swan's passion.³ Also, in this movie the colors pink and gray feature. If red is added to white, it creates pink. If white is added to black, it becomes gray. Pink and gray colors are used to show the changing mind of Nina. Pink contains two elements. Nina's whiteness is marked by the blood of her allergy scars caused by stress. There are scenes in which we see punctures and scars on Nina's back. Nina can see these punctures and marks through the mirror, not by herself. The other colors, pink and white, convey Nina's lack of maturity, that she has not become an adult, a mature woman. Nina prefers to wear white and pink clothes. The colors symbolize her pureness and childishness. The color of her room is pink, filled with pink stuffed toys and dolls.

On the other hand, her doubles – the other Nina and Lily-- wear black. There are lots of rivals to Nina, among whom Lily is the biggest threat, the one who has the role of the Black Swan which Nina covets. In the rehearsal studio, Nina wears white outfits mainly, and sometimes pink ones. Her coat is also pink. But as the story develops, she comes to wear gray and black outfits. It shows that her mind is changing. Gray implies that she is grasping the character of the Black Swan. To show these changes, we discover that she is beginning to reveal her dark self.

The mother-daughter relationship; the referential motif of fairy tale –*Snow White*

In *Snow White*, as long as the queen is more beautiful than her daughter, she is at peace; if not, her daughter has to be killed. The queen cannot tolerate her daughter's superior beauty.

In the movie, the mother-daughter relationship is also an important motif. Nina's⁴ relationship with her mother reminds us of *Snow White*. Nina's mother has conflicting and simultaneous love for and jealousy of her daughter. She places a number of copies of her self-portrait on the wall of her room as if they are her faces in mirrors – these copies of paintings are younger Ericas, Nina's mother. Nina's mother has always supported and helped her daughter, but after Nina is chosen as the principal dancer of the company for the next season, her mother comes to bear a strong

³ Red light and white light is also used effectively on the stage. Blackout often occurs.

⁴ Her mother is not called by her name. She is just called "Mom" by Nina. We are not informed her name Erica in the movie.

jealousy towards her daughter. Erica is a clinging and controlling mother who cannot endure her daughter's success and her growth into a mature woman. If the daughter outgrows the mother, her supports for her daughter stops and she becomes her enemy. It is suggested that Nina's mother had a sexual relationship in the past with the then artistic director. If not thwarted by her pregnancy and child rearing, she might have become a principal dancer herself, she believes. That is why Nina has been brought up as Erica's alter-ego, as a dancer, but once her daughter has realized her dream, a dream that her mother could not realize, the mother's feelings become ambiguous and ultimately hostile.

Snow is cold as well as white. If Nina is Snow White, she is cold without the Black Swan's passion. There is a scene in which Nina's blood drops into a white sink – it reminds us of the opening scene of the *Snow White* in which blood drops from the Queen's finger. It symbolizes that she is becoming the Queen – aside from Snow White's mother.

Fantasy and reality

What is shown is the real world and Nina's paranoid hallucinatory fantasy world. Her fantasy world and real world are mixed many times. We cannot tell what is real from what is hallucinatory inside Nina. Her hallucinatory self affects scenes in this film. For example, someone's face suddenly changes into Nina's face. Aronofsky purposely mixes the real world and the fantasy world, perplexing the audience. Why is Nina involved in this fantasy world? What is noticeable in this movie is that in the new production of the company, Swan Lake, the White Swan's name and the Black Swan's name are both "Swan Queen" – it shows that the White Swan and the Black Swan are the same person. The heroine is not called "Odette/Odile," but only "Swan Queen." In reality, it is very difficult to play the part of one character with two quite different phases because it shows that person to be schizophrenic. But the crucial point is this: Nina has tried to become a "real" Swan Queen on the stage using her body and mind, not "play the part" of her role. She has been haunted by perfectionism – to become the White Swan and the Black Swan at the same time. To be a real Swan Queen is Nina's accomplishment of perfection. Nina attempts to become the Swan Queen, and she has attained it, but she has gone too far into the world of fantasy, to the point of insanity. She has transgressed the boundary between representation and performance. In her, however, it is the ideal state, and at the end of the show, at last Nina feels she attains perfection. She says: "I felt it.

Perfect. It was perfect.” This suggests that she thinks that she has succeeded in becoming the real Swan Queen. To be perfect, she has to fuse with her double as well as being separated from it, because Odette is a good white swan and Odile is an evil black swan. Conventionally in *Swan Lake*, Odette (White Swan) and Odile (Black Swan) are danced by the same dancer, but they are not the same person in the story.

Conclusion – the meaning of being the Queen

If you refer to *Snow White*, the role name, “Swan Queen” is very ironic. Once Nina becomes the Queen, her position replicates that of the Queen in *Snow White*. Nina will now be the person to be replaced by younger dancers such as Lily, just as Nina has replaced Beth. Once you have been the Queen, you become the person to be toppled by the next generation of younger and more skillful dancers; the next Snow White. In the last scene, after the show has finished, it is found that Nina’s abdomen is bleeding, and that she is dying. She had thought she had killed Lily, Nina’s shadow double, with a piece of broken mirror, but it is Nina herself who has been wounded. Like Edgar Allan Poe’s William Wilson in “William Wilson,” Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray in *Dorian Gray*, killing one’s shadow double is killing oneself. In the end we see Nina’s swan song. She cannot stop the emergence of the “new” Snow White. A younger dancer will take over the role.

Selected Bibliography:

- Cahill, Susan, “Through the Looking Glass: Fairy-Tale Cinema and the Spectacle of Femininity in *Stardust* and *The Brother Grimm*,” *Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2010: 57-67.
- Christiansen, Steen, “Body Refractions: Darren Aronofsky’s *Black Swan*,” *akademisk kvarter*, vol. 3, Fall 2011.
- Clover, Joshua, “The Looking Glass,” *Film Quarterly*; Spring 2011; 64.3, 7-9.
- Cooke, Brett, “Microplots: The Case of *Swan Lake*,” *Human nature*, Vol. 6, No.2, 183-196.
- Corpus, Rina Angela, “Ballet in the Dark: A Critical Review of *Black Swan* by Darren Aronofsky” in *Humanities Diliman*, Vol. 8, No 2, 2011, 157-160.
- Fisher, Mark and Amber Jacobs, “Debating *Black Swan*: Gender and Horror,” *Film Quarterly*, Fall 2011, 58:62.
- Grotell, David, “Cinematic Swans,” *Dance Chronicle*, 32: 2009, 509-515.
- Hoberman, J., “Dance Dance Revulsion,” *The Village Voice*; Dec 1-Dec 7, 2010; 55.
- Joseph, Betty, “Projective identification—some clinical aspects,” in *Melanie Klein Today Vol. 1*, 138-9, Routledge, 1988.
- Klein, Melanie, *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. by Juliet Mitchell, Penguin Books, 1986.
- Riley, Charles A. *Color Codes: Modern Theories of Color in Philosophy, Painting and Architecture, Literature, Music and Psychology*, Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1995.
- Stahl, Jennifer, “The Price of Perfection,” *Pointe*; Dec 2010/Jan 2011; 11.6: 76-79.
- Teodoro, Jose, “*Black Swan*,” *Film Comment*; Nov/Dec 2010; 46.6, 70.

Black Swan: the elements of fairy tales

Yamagishi, Ryoko, *Kokucho (Black Swan)*, Hakusensha, 1999.

Zipes, Jack, *The enchanted screen: the unknown history of fairy-tale films*, Taylor & Francis, 2010.

Filmography

Afronofsky, Darren, *Black Swan*, 2011.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my appreciation to Prof. Makoto Furusho.